COMMENTS ON USING THE OBTUSE ANGLE OF STONE TOOLS AS A CUTTING EDGE

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The interpretation of the diverse functional uses of stone tools has, to date, been based principally on a theoritical analysis of their wear patterns. This has been our most reliable archaeological guide, but actual functional experiments will give more substance to the theory. Questions must be posed and answered such as: what materials was prehistoric man forming, altering or modifying with his stone tools and at what angle did he hold the working tool? Were the stone tools held just in the hand when performing these tasks or were they affixed to a handle or holding devise by fitting and wedging, adhered to other materials with vegetable resin, or were they lashed to stocks and shafts? Many stone artifacts have been placed in typological categories which imply function. Some are correctly typed because of actual observation and ethnographic accounts. Other functions are based on theory or the industries of a particular site which places similar implements bearing certain technological characteristics into useful typological categories. However, this tends to associate various shapes with specific functions when, in reality, they could have been multi-purpose tools. As a result, artifacts not conforming with these categories are said to be non-diagnostic and are often discarded as debitage, lithic debris, flakes, exhausted cores, or general manufacturing by-products. The most reliable source of implied function is a careful analysis of the wear pattern on the edges or ridges.

The use of obtuse angles on artifacts as working edges has generally been overlooked or ignored whereas recent evidence reveals functional scars and wear patterns on this angle. The results of functional experiments indicate that these obtuse angles provide additional diagnostic traits. The obtuse edge of a tool will ~~usually~~ often show polish when it is used continually on uncontaminated materials. Striations or scratches on the obtuse edge result from abrasive contamination; and occasional minute step fractures are due to improper holding, too much pressure, or the non-homogeneous nature of the material being formed.

We know from experiment and archaeological evidence that the acute angle on a flake or blade is an excellent cutting edge for yielding materils, but we have failed to consider the functional value of the obtuse angles of more than 90° and less than 130°. The obtuse angle of more than 130° is too flat to have functional value. Experiments in function reveal that the obtuse angle on stone tools can perform tasks impossible to complete with stone tools having acute angle edges of 90° or less. The use of the obtuse angle as a cutting edge has been a revealing experience and has opened the door to further experiments to determine the diversity of this angle as a functional edge.

Experimental results show that the obtuse angle on stone tools made of material even as fragile as obsidian can be used to remove spiral shavings with accuracy and control from dry bone and the tool will still retain its cutting edge. For example, the use of an obtuse angle on stone tools provides a clue to the elaborate carving of lintels of extremely hard wood (sapodillia) used in temple construction by the Maya in the Yucatan. Using the obtuse angle of a stone tool may also explain the modification of other resistant materials such as bone, horn, antler, and ivory. When the acute edge is used to form this type of resistant material, the tool will break or the edge will dull before the task is complet ed.

I made replicas of obtuse angle tools and then used them in many ways - cutting at different angles, holding in different positions, and cutting and forming a variety of materials. Then both the cutting tool and the material being worked were compared with archaeological specimens to estimate the striations, polish and functional flake scars. In each case, the raw materials of both the tools and the material being cut or formed was the same as those employed in prehistoric specimens. It is essential that the worker use the same materials for modification as those available aboriginally - whether they are being gouged, planed or chopped - in order to verify the manner of holding and function. Some implements having acute angle edges - like the obsidian blade - require light force for cutting soft materials and the thumb and index finger furnish sufficient force for light cutting tasks. But when the obtuse angles of tools are used for cutting, more force is required - much the same principle as our modern tool. The acute angle - 0° to 90° - can be used to work softer materials while an obtuse angle - 90° to 130° - is used to work more resistant material. The angle of the tool edge must correspond to the resistance of the material being worked. During the functional experiment, the worker must keep in mind the brittle nature of the stone tool and be familiar with the tool's strong and weak areas. They can not be twisted or used in a levering way and must be kept in alignment with the opposing resistance of the material being worked. Skill in using any hand tool requires practice and reason which demands continued experiment. Even when the experiments yield good results, they may not compare to the work of a skilled aboriginal workman.

One source of an obtuse angle cutting edge is a blade scar ridge on a polyhedral core. The parallel blade scars are slightly concave between the ridges, leaving the ridges as satisfactory obtuse angle working edges. The core is used as one would use a draw plane - holding the proximal and distal ends of the core with the right and left hands. The modern draw plane or draw knife can only be pulled toward the user but the obtuse angles on a polyhedral core can be pushed or pulled. The polyhedral core is drawn at a slight angle rathern than at right angles as one would use a modern plane. When used in this fashion, the depth of the cut may be accurately adjusted b y a slight change of angle of the bearing surface. The obtuse angle of the cutting edge is far stronger than a 90° edge. When soaked antler is worked, shavings three inches long may be removed with a single pass of the core. I know of no single edged metal tool which will remove material with the speed of the obsidian core tool. The cuts are very clean and smooth with no bruising of the surface being planed. When the core planer is used on very hard wood, the finish is excellent and the core can be used to make surfaces flat. It is surprising how durable the edge can be. Use flake scars generally result from holding the tool at the wrong angle or from contamination of the material being planed rather than from function. When the obtuse angle of the core is used repeatedly on resinous wood, resin will build up and impair the cutting action. Then the resin must be scraped off or removed with solvent or a new blade detached from the core to expose two new sharp cutting edges. Or the entire polyhedral core can be rejuvenated by removing a series of blades around the perimeter to expose new obtuse angle cutting edges.

The surprising and excellent results of using the obtuse angles of a core as a shaping and forming tool for antler, hardwood and bone prompted me to look for similar angles on other artifacts for cutting experiments. Similar experiments with both buring blades and cores resulted in only moderate success. Using the burin core in the manner of an engraving tool resulted in the core slipping and its corners breaking after a few passes - generally when the tip was lifted upward to terminate the cutting action. After a minimum amount of work on hard material, the right angle edges of the burin core would crush due to micro step flake scars forming on the margin. However, if the burin blade was removed at more or less than a 90° angle to the margin of the core, both acute and obtuse angles were formed on the core's edge. The acute angle was excellent for working soft woods and the obtuse angle was good for forming more resistant materials. Failure to adequately use an angle of 90° or ~~less~~ MORE is probably due to a lack of understanding of the proper use of the many prehistoric styles of burins.

The natural facets on quartz crystals can also be used as forming tools but are not as efficient or effective as the artifically made obtuse angles on cores and other tools. The natural facets on the crystal are plane surfaces, while those made by removing a blade or flake from a core leave concave surfaces between the obtuse angles giving a sharper cutting edge. If the crystal is made into a blade core by removing blades longitudinally, the obtuse angles of the blade scars are a far more efficient cutting tool than the natural facets. However, a quartz crystal from Bandarawela Celon showing bruises on the natural obtuse angles may well be the result of function (Allchin, 1966, Fig. 30)

Another functional experiment involved the use of a strangulated blade. Obsidian archaeological specimens from the El Inga site in Eucador were brought by Carl Phagan to the 1970 Idaho State University Flintworking Field School. We made replicas of the originals from obsidian. In archaeology this strangulated blade has been classified as a spokeshave. We attempted to use it by placing the concave edge on a wooden shaft and pulling the ventral side of the blade toward the worker. This removed only a slight amount of the wood and left a very irregular cut on the shaft. If additional pressure was applied to the blade, it broke. We then noticed striations on the ventral side of the El Inga specimen between the two opposing concavities which comprised the strangulation. These striations gave us a clue to the manner in which the implement was held and used. The striations indicated that the slightly convex ventral side of the blade was placed flat on the wooden shaft being shaped. The convex surface acted as a bearing and aided the adjustment of the depth of the cut being made. When we used the strangulated blade in this manner, it made a flat smooth cut and required little force to remove a clean shaving. Both concavities serve well as cutting surfaces. The opposite concavity on the blade permitted the worker to tilt back the blade to terminate the cut. When used in this manner, the blade did not break because little force was necessary to remove shavings from the material being worked.

Further functional experiments with the strangulated blade showed that the angle of the cutting edge of the blade could be made acute for soft materials or obtuse for cutting harder materials. If the cutting edge was too acute or was used improperly, then use flakes were removed from the ventral side of the blade rathern than the concave portion of the strangulation. Many tools other than blades exhibit a low angle which are simple and rapid to made or resharpen. Often by a simple removal of a single flake a new working edge is exposed. It is possible to misinterpret this single sharpening flake as a tool when it is only a reconditioning or resharpening flake.

Robert Heiser showed me obsidian cores from Papalhuapa, Guatamela which were formed by blade removal but also showed evidence of function on the obtuse angle ridges. The blade scar ridges on the cores were dulled which indicated they could have been used as planes, wedges, reamers, drills, anvils, pointed percussors for making soft stone figures and some could have been sectioned to be used as preforms for ear plugs. This site is important because it is near its source of raw material and should illustrate many manufacturing steps and can be related to ethnographic accounts. A preliminary report of this site has been published by John A. Graham and Robert F. Heizer (1968). In 1970, Dr. Junius Bird, American Museum of Natural History, gave me a collection of six obsidian cores from Oaxaca, Mexico and they all showed signs of wear on the obtuse angle ridges. Obsidian polyhedral cores from the Metro excavations in Mexico, D.F. shown to me by Jose Luis Lorenzo in 1970 showed apparent use of blade scar ridges, including one core which indicated that the distal end was used as a drill until the core was worn to a smooth cylindrical shape. I collected obsidian polyhedral cores from Teotihuacan, Puebla, Colima, and on the coast in the State of Nayarit and they all bear evidence of use of the blade scar ridges as cutting and forming edges. Through personal communication with Denise de Sonneville Bordes (1970) I learned that she has noted evidence of functional scars on the dorsal ridges of blades from the Upper Paleolithic of Southern France.

Personal examination of a blade from the Clovis site at Murray Springs, Arizona (1969) showed intensive wear and polish on the dorsal ridge while the lateral margins were still quite sharp. This suggests that the ridge was used as a cutting implement before the blade was detached from the core and when the ridge becamedulled was detached from the core to expose two fresh useful ridges. The core with multiple obtuse angle ridges would have been an ideal implement for rapidly shaping the shaft wrench made from the long bone of a mammouth found at Murray Springs (haynes and Hemmings, 1968). Occasionally cores are noted which are not exhausted for further blade detachment but the ridges bear evidence that they were used for shaping tools while they still retained their size.

In conclusion; limited experiment, limited examination of paleolithic implements indicate that more lithic debris should be retained and intensively examined and not discarded as non-diagnostic. It is entirely possible that definite technological traits, characteristic modes of use, manners of holding or hafting, and the nature of the Material being worked can possibly be defined by this lithic debris and we may find multiple-purpose implements. It has been a revelation to find that for some tasks a thin, sharp acute-angled edge will not perform as well as an obtuse-angled edge. Aboriginal tools bearing an obtuse angle working edge may not fall into the categories of well defined types. Some may be xxxxx assymetrical without definite form, but a careful study of the wear pattern on the obtuse angles may reveal that they were functional tools.